

# Žižek and Performance edited by Broderick Chow and Alex Mangold

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***Žižek and Performance* edited by Broderick Chow and Alex Mangold**

**Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014, 280 pp, ISBN: 9781137410900 (hardback)**

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This is a welcome introduction to a series that has been eagerly anticipated by those engaged in the growing field of Performance Philosophy. As such, in addition to its particular focus on the work of Slavoj Žižek, it brings to the foreground not only the question of ‘What is Performance Philosophy?’, as articulated by the series editors (p. viii), but who is it for? Is it for those interested in philosophy, for those interested in performance or, primarily, those scholars who are interested in how each speaks to the other? Interestingly, Žižek’s own contribution to this volume, while being characteristically engaging, also points to the potential challenges of the interdisciplinary exploration under way in this series. For those readers who are experts in the fields of theatre and performance, Žižek’s ruminations on the radical potential offered by the theatrical staging of the ideological edifice constitute alternative theoretical articulations of already familiar Brechtian theories, and his discussion of the gaze gives back to performance theory what it borrowed from Lacanian psychoanalysis in the first place, so the ruminations sit comfortably – if lucidly - in relatively familiar territory.

Thus this particular volume, I would suggest, has most to offer theatre and performance scholars, who are not specialists, but who may be already engaged with Žižek to some degree, and are seeking to further and broaden their field of reference. For such readers, the inevitable repetition as each writer grapples at the beginning of each essay to give the reader the necessary (and often overlapping) Žižekian context from which their own insights are drawn, is less of a problem than a consolidation that enables the reader to deepen their understanding of the theory, before benefitting from the specific insights that each essay offers.

This is certainly the case for those essays that seek to apply Žižek's understanding of ideology, not as an illusion that hides the real, but as the fantasy that supports and structures it. The focus on how the subject's complicity with such fantasy structures might be evaded, or most radically exposed, by certain performances or dramaturgical strategies underpins much of the work in this volume. Bryce Lease teases out 'the distinction between symptom and fantasy' (p. 35) in order to counterpoint the ideological premises of the theatres of Grotowski and Kantor; Stephen Greer mobilises Žižek's reading of Butler to argue for the resistant potential of certain queer performances and Linda Taylor compellingly argues that Forced Entertainment's production of *Exquisite Pain* (2005) proposes a potentially more radical challenge than productions such as *Speak Bitterness* (1995) to normative structures that implicitly depend on the support of ideological fantasy for their validation. Graham Wolfe develops a particularly intriguing hypothesis drawn from Žižek's 'fantasy of the enjoying Other' (p. 122), proposing that over-identification, or the performer's socially inappropriate enjoyment of the role, be that in an erection, or over-identification with a racist or violent tirade, might be the best way of exposing, and thus problematising, the audience's own temptation to safely indulge in such fantasy.

The reader's understanding of different aspects of Žižek's theory is thus deepened by its application throughout the volume to an eclectic range of case studies which cannot all be detailed here. Among those essays drawing most usefully on additional aspects of Žižekian thought are Peter Boenisch's exploration of Žižek's "'negative" ontology of the subject' (p. 48) to elucidate how the spectator of Guy Cassiers's intermedial theatre is compelled to watch herself watching, thus constituting a split subject that opens up the potential for agency and resistance. Patrick Duggan's essay, in a similar vein, examines Žižek's theories concerning the oscillation of the real and their influence on Duggan's own production of Anthony Neilson's *Normal* (1991) which 'deliberately destabilises its own representational frames to encourage the audience to question what is was they were watching' (p.

202). Natasha Lushetich, via an analysis of facebook, lucidly argues that the ideological terrain of Žižek's liberal totalitarianism is not a theoretical imposition of analytical thought, as has been sometimes argued, but more accurately arises as a direct consequence of the *modus operandi* of socio-virtual performance and the illusory freedom of choice that lies within its co-ordinates.

While most of the essays focus on applying Žižek to better illuminate questions of theatre and performance, two essays succeed in also offering new and vital insights to the field of Žižekian studies. Broderick Chow's chapter is particularly successful in drawing on the ever-potential and visceral failure of the joke in the live context of stand-up comedy, to offer a reading of Žižek in which his jokes might be better understood as provoking dissensus, rather than mechanisms of humour. In his excellent and thought-provoking analysis of the rise to stardom of Susan Boyle, Dave Calvert not only uses Žižek's notions of the Real, Imaginary and Symbolic to offer a forensic examination of the ideological manoeuvres at play by which the symbolic order sought to 'diffuse the threat' (p. 191) presented by Boyle's learning-disabled superstar status, but also productively contests Žižek's positioning of 'actual idiocy' as a mechanism to 'fill out the place of the Void and lend definition to their non-disabled counterparts' (p. 180). In both these chapters, Žižek's theories are enabling the ideological workings of a particular instance or mode of performance to be rigorously articulated, whilst the analysis of these performances simultaneously throws back unexpected elucidation of or challenge to the philosophical theories that underpinned the analysis.

The quality of many of the individual essays perhaps highlights the greatest challenge of the series. Would all scholars working in the fields of stand-up comedy or learning disabled theatre, for example, dip into *Žižek and Performance* to benefit from pivotal insights for their field? Perhaps so, if this series is successful in beginning to establish philosophy as a key starting point for all theatre and performance scholars, not just those whose research is defined by its engagement with philosophy.

The strongest essays in this volume certainly have the potential for conversion of the sceptical, which promises well for the future of the field.